

# 5 Accuracy Classifications and Standards

## 5.1 Classifications of Accuracy

All surveys by performed Caltrans or others on all Caltrans-involved transportation improvement projects shall be classified according to the standards shown on the chart in Figure 5-1. Standards shown are minimum standards for each order of survey.

In addition to conforming to the applicable standards, surveys must be performed using field procedures that meet the specifications for the specified order of survey. Specifications for field procedures are provided in Section 6, “Global Positioning System (GPS) Survey Specifications,” Section 7, “Total Station Survey System (TSSS) Survey Specifications” and Section 8, “Differential Leveling Survey Specifications.” Survey accuracy standards are meaningless without corresponding survey procedure specifications. Without the use of proper specifications, chance and compensating errors can produce results that indicate a level of accuracy that has not been met.

The order of accuracy to be used for a specific type of survey is listed on the chart in Figure 5-1. Tolerance requirements for setting construction stakes are provided in Section 13, “Construction Surveys.” Tolerance requirements for collecting data are provided in Section 12, “Engineering Surveys.”

## 5.2 Precision and Accuracy

Accuracy is the degree of conformity with a standard or a measure of closeness to a true value.

Accuracy relates to the quality of the *result obtained* when compared to the standard

The standard used to determine accuracy can be:

- a) An exact value, such as the sum of the three angles of a plane triangle is 180 degrees.
- b) A value of a conventional unit as defined by a physical representation thereof, such as the international meter.
- c) A survey or map deemed sufficiently near the ideal or true value to be held constant for the control of dependent operations.

Precision is the degree of refinement in the performance of an operation (procedures and instrumentation) or in the statement of a result. The term precise also is applied, by custom, to methods and equipment used in attaining results of a high order of accuracy, such as using 3-wire leveling methods or a one second theodolite. The more precise the survey method, the higher the probability that the survey results can be repeated.

Survey observations can have a high precision, but be inaccurate. For example, observing with a poorly adjusted instrument.

Precision is indicated by the number of decimal places to which a computation is carried and a result stated. However, calculations are not necessarily made more precise by the use of tables or factors of more decimal places. The actual precision is governed by the accuracy of the source data and the number of significant figures rather than by the number of decimal places.

**Please Refer to:**

**Figure 5-1. Caltrans Orders of Survey Accuracy**

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The accuracy of a field survey depends directly upon the precision of the survey. Although by chance (for example, compensating error) surveys with high order accuracies might be attained without high order precision, such accuracies are not valid. Therefore, all measurements and results should be shown with the number of significant figures that are commensurate with the precision used to attain the results. For instance, distances measured with an EDM would be shown to the nearest millimeter, while distances scaled on a USGS 7½' quad map would be shown to the nearest 10 meters. Similarly, all surveys must be performed with a precision that ensures that the desired accuracy is attained.

Care should be taken to show computed values with regards to the accuracies of the measurements. For example in the case of a distance measured as 6.26 m with a cloth tape:

- $6.26 \text{ m} \times \pi = 19.67 \text{ m}$ , not 19.66637 m

### **5.2-1 Significant Figures**

The significant figures of a measurement are those digits which are known plus one estimated digit following the known digits.

Recorded numerical values, measured and computed, must contain only those digits which are known plus one estimated digit. Recorded field measurements should never indicate a precision greater than that used in the actual survey. For example, when measurements are made with a cloth tape, values should be recorded to the nearest 0.01 m rather than 0.001 m.

## **5.3 Errors**

Field measurements are never exact. Observations contain various types of errors. Often some of these errors are known and can be eliminated by applying appropriate corrections. Even after all known errors are corrected, all measurements are in error by some unknown value. It is the responsibility of the Surveys Branch to perform surveys so that errors fall within certain acceptable standards.

### **5.3-1 Types of Errors**

#### **Blunders:**

Blunders, which are unpredictable human mistakes, are not technically errors. Examples of blunders are: reading and recording mistakes, transposition of numbers, and neglecting to level an instrument. Blunders are generally caused by carelessness, misunderstanding, confusion, or poor judgment. Blunders can usually be detected by computing survey closures, careful checking of recorded and computed values and checking observations. Blunders must be found and eliminated from the work before errors are identified and minimized by adjustment procedure.

**Systematic Error:**

Systematic errors, given the same conditions, are of the same magnitude and algebraic sign. Because systematic errors have the same sign, they tend to be cumulative. Thermal contraction and expansion of a steel tape and refraction of angular observation are examples of systematic errors. Systematic errors can be eliminated by procedures such as balancing foresights and backsights in a level loop or by applying a correction, such as a temperature correction to a taped measurement. All detected systematic errors must be eliminated before adjusting a survey for random error.

**Random Error:**

Random errors do not follow any fixed relationship to conditions or circumstances of the observation. Their occurrence, magnitude and algebraic sign, cannot be predicted. An example of random error is instrument pointing. Because of the equal probability of algebraic sign, random errors tend to be compensating. Procedures and corrections cannot compensate for random error. Random errors must be distributed throughout the survey based on most probable values by adjustment procedures.

Some systematic errors if undetected act like random errors. For instance, centering error caused by an optical plummet misadjustment is a systematic error, but the error appears random because the orientation of the tribrach to the line of sight is random. In actuality, even a well-adjusted instrument has some amount of error that is treated as systematic random error.

## 5.4 Least Squares Adjustment

The least squares method of observation adjustment should be used for the adjustment of most types of Caltrans survey data, whether collected by levels, total stations, or GPS receivers. To be performed correctly the adjustment is a two-part procedure. First an unconstrained or free adjustment is done allowing the new observations to be analyzed, their quality determined, and errors detected. Second, a constrained adjustment is performed, which fits the observations to the reference system, thereby determining the coordinate values of the points observed.

### 5.4-1 Data Preparation

#### **Coordinates:**

In order to perform a least squares adjustment, positional values must be assigned to each point in a two or three dimensional network. In a one dimensional network, such as in leveling, only one point needs to have an elevation. These values can be approximate if their true values are unknown. In some programs, the approximate value can be incorrect by several thousand meters. However, the closer the approximate values are to the true positions the quicker the adjustment can be solved. Also, the chances that a solution can not be calculated increases as the amount of error in the approximate values increases. Some adjustment programs including Star\*Net and Caltrans Survey Software (CTSS) have the ability to use the network observations to calculate approximate values.

#### **Observations:**

Each observation used in the network adjustment should have an associated weight. The weight of an observation indicates how much influence it should have on the final solution. Most programs allow the user to assign an accuracy or precision value, called the “observation standard error” ( $\sigma$ ), to each observation. The program then calculates the observation weight using the following equation:  $\text{Weight} = 1.0/\sigma^2$ . Obviously, the smaller the standard error, the higher the weight.



There are two ways weights can be assigned to an observation. The first, and least desirable way, is to assign weights to observational groups. For example, weighing all angular observations to the accuracy of the total station used and all distances to the accuracy of the electronic distance measuring device. This method should be employed if no other information is available.

The better method is to weight each observation individually. This is normally done by calculating the standard deviation (standard error) of the observation. CTSS employs a procedure which combines both methods. First it calculates the standard deviation of all observations. Next it compares the calculated standard deviation with predefined minimum standard error values for each type of observation from the specifications of the instrument used for the observations. The larger of these two values is then used in the least squares adjustment.

**Errors:**

The following table illustrates the methods for handling the three types of errors found in surveying observations.

TYPE	ACTION	EXAMPLES
Blunders	This type of error must be removed before the least squares solution is obtained.	Mis-naming an observed point. Site not set up over the point.
Systematic	The effects of this type of error must be eliminated by procedures, adjusted, or weighting.	EDM Offset Corrections
Random	These errors will be distributed by the adjustment.	Small Observation Errors

**Figure 5-2**

### 5.4-2 Unconstrained Adjustment

The unconstrained or free adjustment is used to evaluate the observations which comprise the network and the weights and observation standard errors assigned to them. In order to properly evaluate the network, the network must be a closed system. That is, all points in the network should be observed from at least two other points. This means that a closed traverse or level loop is acceptable, but an open ended traverse or level run is not. (Note: This does not mean that least squares can not be used to adjust these types of networks, it simply means that the least squares adjustment will produce a minimal amount of analysis information.

#### Procedure:

1. As shown in the table below fix no more information than the minimum required to perform the unconstrained adjustment (also called a minimally constrained adjustment).

NETWORK TYPE	FIX
1d – Levels	The elevation of one point.
2d – Conventional Network or Traverse	The northing and easting of one point and any bearing or azimuth in the network.
3d – Conventional Network or Traverse	The northing and easting of one point and any bearing or azimuth in the network. The elevation of one point in the network.
3d – GPS Network	Nothing required to be fixed; however, one point can be fixed if desired.

**Figure 5-3**

2. Run the adjustment. Normally a two dimensional adjustment is run first to analyze the horizontal component of the network and make any needed modifications. After a satisfactory resolution of the horizontal data is obtained a three dimensional adjustment is performed. Problems with the three dimensional adjustment indicate errors in the vertical component (e.g. vertical angle pointing, H.I. and target height measurements). These “vertical” errors can be found easier when using this two-step unconstrained adjustment process.

3. Analyze the statistical results of the adjustment. There are four main areas that should be analyzed to determine the quality of the network adjustment. These areas are:
  - **Standard Deviation of Unit Weight:** (Also called Standard Error of Unit Weight, Error Total, Network Reference Factor, etc.) The closer this value is to 1.0 the better your network is weighted. The acceptable range is 0.8 to 1.2. In general if all blunders have been removed, a value greater than 1.0 indicates that the observations are not as good as their weights, while a value less than 1.0 indicates that the observations are better than their weights.
  - **Observation Residuals:** Usually the adjustment output will include a listing which includes observations, residuals, standard errors, and a warning value or factor. The residual is the amount of adjustment applied to the observation to allow it to best fit the network. Many programs compare the residual to the observation standard error and then flag excessively large residuals. Both CTSS and STAR\*NET will flag observations when the residual is greater than three times the standard error. Large residuals may indicate blunders which were not previously identified and eliminated.
  - **Coordinate Standard Deviations and Error Ellipses:** A network with a good Standard Deviation of Unit Weight and well weighted observations with no flagged residuals can still produce points with high standard deviations and large error ellipses (due to the effect, for instance, of network geometry). These values should be examined to determine if the point accuracies are high enough for their intended application.
  - **Relative Errors:** These values, often shown as parts per million, predict the amount of error which can be expected to be found between points in the network. However, values can also be shown as directional and distance errors in seconds and meters, respectively.

One commonly used least squares adjustment program, Star\*Net, also uses a statistical test called the Chi-Square test to give a pass/fail grade to the adjustment. This test compares the actual statistical results to the expected theoretical results (that is a standard deviation of unit weight of 1.0) given the number of degrees of freedom in the network. (Degrees of freedom equal the number of observations minus the number of unknowns in the network.) Obviously, it is desirable to pass this test; however, it is not an absolute requirement. If a network has a standard error of unit weight close to 1.0, no high observation residuals, and still does not pass the Chi-square test, the network should be accepted and the Chi-square test ignored.

4. If necessary, make modifications as determined from the analysis of the adjustment statistical results. These modifications could include: (1) adding, deleting, or editing observations, (2) changing observation standard errors, and (3) modifying centering and standard H.I. errors.
  - **Adding, Deleting, or Editing Observations:** At times, it is necessary to add observations to a network. If all other statistical indicators look good but some of the points have excessively large standard deviations, it is probably necessary to add additional observations to those points. Deleting observations may be required if they are proven to include blunders, that is, the observation simply does not fit the network. Sometimes a good observation is listed using the wrong point names, in which case, editing the point names will remove the blunder.
  - **Changing Observation Standard Errors:** Observation standard errors should not be changed without a good reason. The only justification for changing a standard error is special field conditions noted in the field notes. Normally, if an observation fits poorly and its standard error was calculated individually, it is a blunder. Justifying changing standard errors is more reasonable when the standard errors were assigned on a group basis. However, if changes are made they should be made for the whole group, not for an individual observation.
  - **Modifying Centering and H.I. Standard Errors:** Mistakes in assigning centering and H.I. errors is often misinterpreted as poor observation errors, especially if the standard errors were developed for observation groups. This problem is easier to detect when standard errors are developed individually.
5. Readjust the network. The unconstrained adjustment is an iterative process. It may be necessary to adjust and modify the network several times until an acceptable solution is determined. Once this has occurred a listing of the adjustment results should be printed out for filing and labeled as being the unconstrained adjustment.

### 5.4-3      **Constrained Adjustment Procedure**

1. Fix the coordinates of the known control points.

**Note:** Once the unconstrained adjustment has been accepted no modifications of any type should be made to the network with the exception of fixing the coordinates of the control points.

2. Run the adjustment.
3. Analyze the effects of the fixed control on the network adjustment. This is done to determine the validity of the coordinates of the control points. The validity of the network observations was proven in the unconstrained adjustment phase. Depending on the quality of the reference system used to constrain the network, the Standard Deviation of Unit Weight of the final adjustment may not be close to 1.0 and many of the observation residuals may be flagged as being excessively large. This situation is acceptable if it has been determined that there are no blunders in the control. The surveyor in charge of the adjustment must decide if this degradation in quality is significant. If the survey network meets required accuracies, the adjustment is complete. If accuracy standards are not met, then modifications of the fixed points and readjustments may be appropriate.
4. Modify the fixed points as appropriate. There are two modification options available. First, check the fixed coordinates for errors transpositions, and misidentifications . If required, edit the coordinates and readjust. If this is not the problem, then one or more of the control points is not in its published position. An analysis of the relationship of the control points can help determine which point or points are unacceptable.

A procedure which can be used to analyze the control is as follows:

- Calculate the inverse distance between the published positions of all the fixed control points.
  - Calculate the inverse distance between the unconstrained positions of all the fixed control points.
  - Calculate the difference between the published inverse distances and the unconstrained inverse distances.
  - Using these differences and the published inverse distances calculate a ppm value for each inverse.
  - Examine the ppm values. High ppm values indicate problems with the associated control. A control point which shows up in several of the inverses with high ppm values is probably not in its published position. Try running the adjustment again with this point free.
  - Alternatively, control points can be held free or fixed on a trial and error basis until the problem has been detected. Once a determination about the control is made the final adjustment is performed. After the final adjustment, a listing of the adjustment results should be printed out, labeled as the constrained adjustment, and filed along with a note about any control problems.
5. Readjust network, if necessary.